

The Transcription of Four Instrumental Concerti of J.S Bach for Recorders.

Background

Despite its inclusion as one of a group of solo instruments in *concerti grossi* such as the Brandenburg Concerti numbers 2 and 4, and its occasional use in selected cantata movements, the recorder was almost completely neglected by Bach as a concerto instrument in its own right. This is rather unusual considering the relatively extensive library of recorder concerti in the hands of his contemporaries. This may be partly attributed to the fact that Bach seemed to be content scoring solo concerti for either violin or harpsichord. On the other hand, there is evidence that several of his harpsichord concerti were originally meant as concerti for oboe or oboe d'amore so he may not have been as hesitant to write for winds as one might think. The most convincing of these oboe reconstructions are those made from the Concerto BWV 1060 to oboe and violin and the Concerto BWV 1055 to oboe d'amore solo. In addition, there is some evidence that the *Sinfonia* to Cantata BWV 156 for solo oboe and orchestra may have been taken from a lost oboe concerto. The flute makes an appearance as a solo instrument in BWV 1044, but accompanied by the violin and harpsichord in *concerto grosso* form, as in the 5th Brandenburg Concerto. So there really are no existing solo wind concerti of Bach, only theoretical reconstructions based upon surviving harpsichord concerti. It is worth noting, however, that two recorders do make an appearance in the Concerto BWV 1057 for harpsichord, taken from the 4th Brandenburg Concerto, but here they are also delegated a supporting role in a trio of soloists.

The Bach concerto was a fluid and abstract form. Works were redone and retranscribed to suit the time and parts were added in and taken away. We know for a fact that most, if not all, the harpsichord concerti existed in an original version for another instrument. The only definite exception is the Concerto BWV 1061 for two harpsichords in C Major, which was originally a concerto for two harpsichords unaccompanied. There is some doubt as to whether or not Bach added the orchestral parts himself, and the second movement does away with them entirely. It is not my goal to make the case that any of the surviving harpsichord concerti once existed as concerti for recorders, as that is a preposterous theory. But it is obvious that the recorder was one in a series of musical paint brushes that Bach used to render his orchestral works, although as previously stated, it was not the one he chose to use the most.

Modern Transcriptions

The abstraction of Bach's music means that it can very easily be transferred to other instruments without loss of many of the qualities that made the original great. We find Bach transcriptions for synthesizer, saxophone quartet, brass quintet and almost any other ensemble under the sun. Some works, such as *Art of the Fugue*, transcend instrumentation completely and are thought to have been written as exercise alone, and were never meant to be played. By no coincidence, *Art of the Fugue* is one of the most frequently transcribed of all of Bach's works. It is important to note the ways in which my transcriptions of the four concerti BWV 1043, 1060, 1063 and 1064 differ from an arrangement of, say, *Art of the Fugue* for saxophone quartet. I will explore these differences here:

- 1. Consistency of orchestral parts.** This means that the orchestral parts remain unchanged. The scoring of the original tutti parts is maintained and the distribution of parts is followed according to what is believed to be the performance practice of Bach's time. Pitch is maintained at A=415 and Bach-era copies of instruments are used. Perhaps one of the most striking features of the transcriptions is that all of the works remain untransposed from the originals. Bach always transposed his harpsichord concerti down a step from the corresponding originals to take into consideration the range of the harpsi-

chord. Only one concerto, BWV 1060, is widely debated in this regard, as the harpsichord version is in c minor and most scholars claim that the original oboe and violin concerto (if this was the instrumentation) would also have been in c minor out of respect for the oboe's range. If this is the case, then this would be the only concerto that retains the same key in both original and harpsichord version. Despite all of this, the transcription for two alto recorders of BWV 1060 is in d minor and likewise maintains the stepwise transposition of every other concerto in the set.

2. Use of historically correct solo instruments. The solo recorder parts are performed on instruments that would have been played in Bach's time, although only the alto recorder was used by Bach himself as far as we know. Each concerto transcription uses a different range recorder as follows:

BWV 1043: 2 soprano recorders in c

BWV 1060: 2 alto recorders in f

BWV 1063: 3 alto recorders in f

BWV 1064: 3 voice flutes in d

The majority of the instruments used for the performances are based on copies of instruments originally manufactured by Peter Bressan (1663 - 1731), a French maker who emigrated to England and whose flutes, recorders and oboes were used by professionals throughout Northern Europe during the high Baroque.

How the transcriptions are done

When reworking violin or harpsichord music for the recorder, the first and most significant problem is that of range. The recorder is simply not capable of covering the range that the violin or harpsichord can. The range of the original solo parts is usually about two octaves and a fifth. While the recorder can handle a little over two octaves, depending on the instrument, its lowest register would hardly be audible against a full orchestra. In addition, some semitones are unplayable or difficult to render in certain keys. One notable example is the semitone above the second octave root tone. The following phrase from BWV 1043, violin I would be playable on a soprano recorder except for the high c-sharp in the second measure.



Some recorder players achieve this tone by blocking the bell of the instrument with, for example, the leg. However this gives a rather inelegant appearance on stage and is difficult to execute quickly. I have chosen to substitute the tone in question with the tone A, providing a viable solution, but one that is less than perfect. This passage is also doubled in the orchestra, so the alternate tone is less problematic than it would be in a solo passage.



The only other solution to this would be to lower the entire piece a whole step, bringing it into c minor. But this would create more problems than it would solve in the long run. The

transcription process can often be likened to a kind of damage control. How do we accomplish the transcription while doing the least amount of damage to the original part?

Range is also a problem in longer passages where the solo instrument covers an extended tessitura. The following phrase from BWV 1060 is a good example:



The only way to get around passages like this is to break the octave at certain places. The choice of where to raise or lower the octave is largely subjective but can be guided by certain principles. For example, one can focus on places where the line is naturally broken by leaps or by significant tonal alterations and choose the octave breaks there. Such a method is used in the following example from the recorder transcriptions (octave change is indicated with an asterisk):



I have also taken care to preserve the proper distribution of chords when possible. This means that if, for example, the second harpsichord lies below the first, then the recorders must be displaced in the same way so that unwanted chord inversions are avoided.



Properly voiced chords, BWV 1064 transcription, recorders I, II, and III

Another major issue in the transcription of harpsichord or violin concerti to recorder is the way that instrument-specific figurations are dealt with. Perhaps the most obvious example is the following passage from the double violin concerto BWV 1043.



Double stops giving 4-voice chords, BWV 1043, violin I and II

Possible ways to deal with this is to use the lower pitches as appoggiaturi, to set the two pitches to sixteenth notes, or to choose one of the pitches and maintain the eighth note rhythm. I use the last two techniques in varying degrees depending upon the situation, but here I chose to keep the eighth notes.



2 voice chords, soprano recorders I and II, BWV 1043 transcription

This way, the rhythmic movement is preserved without changing the gesture of the two solo voices. Of course, some of the chordal flavor is lost, but it seems to be the lesser of two transcriptional “evils”.

Choice of instruments

As was previously stated, the alto recorder was the instrument of choice for Bach’s orchestrations. But the tonal palette of the recorder transcriptions can be expanded with a wider variety of instruments. I have chosen two alto recorders for the transcription of BWV 1060. This is largely inspired by the kinship that I feel is shared between the alto recorder and the oboe, but again choice of instrument is largely subjective. Usually, though, it’s possible to look at a certain piece and deduce which recorder would be most appropriate based upon the way that range and key are treated. In particular, the second movement of Concerto BWV 1060 seems to ask for two alto recorders. They can handle the large majority of the pitches without changing octaves at inappropriate places, and the key of d minor / F Major can be maintained.



Idiomatic alto recorder parts in BWV 1060, transcription, alto recorders I and II

The double violin concerto BWV 1043 is played with two soprano recorders. This might seem like a curious choice until one considers the fact that the key of d minor can easily be retained with two c instruments. In addition, the high tessitura of these instruments will allow them to project better over the full orchestra, and they will be able to represent the energy that I think is created by two virtuosic violin parts.

The two triple concerti BWV 1063 and 1064 are played by three alto recorders in f and three voice flutes in d respectively. This was again as much a matter of key and tessitura, as it was a matter of tone color. For BWV 1063, I wanted a higher sound that would better represent what I feel are the menacing minor characteristic of the outer movements. The second movement is a curiously chromatic adventure through all sorts of tonal colors, and seemed to work best on alto recorders. BWV 1064 is supposedly taken from a lost triple violin concerto in D Major. The positive jubilation of this piece and the *alla francese* characteristic that runs throughout the work seemed to beg for three voice flutes.

Summary

As I hopefully have made clear in the above article, the choices made when transcribing a harpsichord or violin concerto into a recorder concerto are part subjective and part pragmatic. Some things just work better than others, but another performer might very well treat them in a different way. The goal should be that the pieces are delivered convincingly and that care and thought are given to all parts of the transcription process from conceptualization to performance. We hope that this will be the case.

James Howard Young, March 2008